

Oil Economy and the Niger Delta Quest for Liberation in Ben Binebai's *Drums of The Delta*

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Oil and gas flow ceaselessly in Nigeria's Niger Delta, sustaining the country's economy. Despite the wealth these resources provide, the region has contended with marginalisation, environmental degradation, social injustice, and extreme poverty. These conditions of oppression propel and plunge the youths into a repeated cycle of revolution. Ben Binebai's *Drums of the Delta* documents the oil politics in Nigeria and the Niger Delta revolutionary quest for liberation. However, because it is still assumed that facts and records about the Niger Delta sociopolitical and economic struggles are exclusive to fields other than drama, scholarly studies on *Drums of the Delta* are scarce regarding the politics surrounding the oil economy and the essence of the ageless Niger Delta struggle for freedom. Consequently, the play's significance as a veritable source for sustaining the existential struggles and educating audiences and readers about them is undermined. Therefore, this study interrogates oil politics in Nigeria and the Niger Delta's quest for liberation, as thematically portrayed in *Drums of the Delta*, using Karl Marx's conflict theory as a theoretical anchor and drawing on literary and sociological approaches. The study finds that interest in oil wealth is the driving force behind politics in Nigeria and that the ultimate aim of the Niger Delta's struggle for liberation is to occupy a dominant position in the petro-economy. In conclusion, the play demonstrates the efficacy of drama in understanding the intrigues and dynamics of the politics and struggles characterising the Niger Delta region. The study recommends adopting docudrama, such as *Drums of the Delta*, to preserve history, educate readers/audiences, inspire action and solidarity, and provide a platform for the Niger Delta voice to be heard.

Keywords: Oil economy, Niger Delta, liberation struggle, conflict theory, drama.

Introduction

Arguably, Nigeria's sole resource today is crude oil, and 75% of it is found in the Niger Delta. Oil production and marketing have been central to Nigeria's economy since the 1970s (Okonta and Douglas 44). As Brisibe puts it, "Nigeria exists as a nation because of the oil derived from the Niger Delta soil" (47). However, since oil-producing transnational companies began exploring and exploiting crude oil in the Niger Delta in 1956, the environment and economic activities of host communities have been severely damaged and subjected to deep and diverse ecological problems, resulting in the loss of lives and livelihoods. Brisibe reveals that about 7-8 billion cubic metres of gas are flared annually, and hundreds of millions of barrels of oil have been spilt over 50 years in the Niger Delta (30).

Omoweh gives a helpful clue to the companies' activities, thus:

In the past four and a half decades that Shell has produced and still produces crude oil in the Niger Delta, there has hardly been any year that it did not dump untreated harmful drilling waste on land and into swamps, flare gas both day and night and spill crude oil without any clean-up exercise and post-spillage environmental and socio-economic assessment (1).

In addition to environmental destruction, which has left people facing perilous consequences, the Niger Delta is infrastructurally deprived and excluded from the benefits of the national petroleum economy. The combined issues of underdevelopment and injustice have generated critical questions, such as why the state has abandoned its responsibility to the region and why the people are excluded from

the distribution of the country's petroleum wealth. The frustration stemming from unanswered questions ignited a wave of rebellious activities, gradually evolving into a collective regional quest for liberation.

The Niger Delta has long fought for its rights and privileges over its land in the face of environmental degradation, political marginalisation and economic exploitation. Two epochal moments define the Niger Delta quest for liberation: Isaac Boro's Declaration for the Niger Delta Republic and the Kaiama Declaration. Boro, an Ijaw from Bayelsa State, inaugurated the Niger Delta liberation movement and is recorded as the first to launch a revolutionary movement in Nigeria. In 1966, he declared a republic for the people of the Niger Delta and protected it for twelve eventful days with arms and ammunition. He was sentenced to death but granted amnesty by the state in the wake of the declaration of the Biafran Republic by the eastern Nigerian people led by Odumegwu Ojukwu. Ironically, Boro died fighting to protect Nigeria's sovereignty and unity. Still, even after his death, the Niger Delta people have continued to fight on different fronts for justice and equity because the country's political leadership has refused to address the issues.

The Kaiama Declaration, a well-crafted charter of the Niger Delta, issued in 1998 by Ijaw youths and long after the Boro Declaration of the Republic of the Niger Delta in 1966, is a milestone proclamation of Niger Delta unity and self-determination that reinvigorated the spirit and flesh of the Isaac Boro Declaration. The declaration that erected the flag, badge, and creed of Ijaw youths is a

sacred text powered by the essence of resistance and the interminable pursuit of self-determination. Binebai notes that the difference between the Isaac Boro Declaration and the Kaiama Declaration is that "while Isaac Boro demanded extreme self-determination, Ijaw youths, with the Kaiama Declaration, proclaimed to remain within the Nigerian nation-state and to have control over the ancestral lands and resources of the Ijaws" (1). Despite differences in demand, the two declarations similarly employed violent means to assert their rights.

The Kaiama Declaration bred Niger Delta militancy and intellectual activism. The Niger Delta militancy is "a movement of young men and women, solely driven to action by their sense of social justice and determination to make Nigeria a better and more equitable country for all citizens" (Clark 281). Since no Nigerian administration has ever cared, militants in the Niger Delta, as a matter of history, only carried on the struggle begun in the last century by revolutionaries like Isaac Boro, Amangala and Nyanayo to win equal rights for their people within the unequal Nigerian federation where majorities proudly accommodate themselves while containing minorities, handed over to them, without consent and consultation, by retreating colonial power. The militants provided physical and spiritual security for the liberation struggle and, when necessary, resisted or confronted the opposition's oppressive forces. Government Owezide Ekpompolo (Tompolo), Asari Dokubo, Ateke Tom, Joshua Maciver, and others led this military wing. The militancy dispensation

temporarily ended in 2009, when President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua offered them amnesty in exchange for peace. Although militancy and intellectual activism progressed simultaneously, the latter, in contrast to the militants' violent approach, was carried out without arms.

The intellectual activism brought figures such as Ken Saro-Wiwa into the limelight. Saro-Wiwa, an environmentalist and creative writer, pursued a liberation movement because of the continuous pillage and degradation of the environment of the Niger Delta, but he was summarily executed for treason by the administration of General Sanni Abacha, a Nigerian military dictator at the time. Saro-Wiwa's approach was non-violent, engaging local and international organisations, agencies, parliaments, institutions, governments and personalities through creative speeches and writings, as well as protests and rallies. The intellectual activism bequeathed by Saro-Wiwa flourished, attracting writers from the Niger Delta creative space. On the wings of intellectual activism are dramatists such as J.P. Clark, Ben Binebai, Hope Eghagha, Ekanpou Enewaredideke and Akpos Adesi who are passionate and concerned about the region's plight. The worsening environmental conditions, the marginalisation of the region, and the government's refusal to pursue an equitable system that allows people to participate as equal stakeholders in the appropriation of oil and gas revenues prompted these dramatists to focus their writings on the liberation struggle and reflect the realities in their creative works. Eghagha

puts it thus: "As a writer whose home region is locked in poverty in spite of the abundance of natural wealth, one cannot stay aside and watch. Attention should be drawn to the conflicts and contradictions which ordinary people in exploited societies have to contend with in the daily routine of existence" (6).

Among the existing body of dramatic work, Ben Binebai's *Drums of the Delta* provides a potent, exemplary platform for interrogating Nigeria's oil economy and the reasons for the liberation agitations undertaken by the people. Ben Binebai, a Niger Delta literary activist, through *Drums of the Delta*, brings drama into practical action as a veritable source of documentation, a weapon of protest, and a means of aggressively addressing the challenges confronting the region, thereby forging a path towards a more just and equitable society. The play connects Isaac Boro's declaration, the Kaiama Declaration, and the reign of militancy, which are linked by the "violence approach". It captures the essence of the ageless Niger Delta struggle for freedom and the significance of resource control. However, despite its resourcefulness and the methodological treatment of themes related to the struggle for and monopolisation of Nigeria's oil economy and the conditions of oppression that propel and plunge them into a repeated cycle of revolution, the play has not received sufficient critical attention. Therefore, addressing this gap is imperative, especially for scholars who have not yet engaged with the play from that crucial thematic perspective.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Karl Marx's conflict theory. The theory holds that conflict arises when the status quo is challenged due to marginalisation and oppression of one group by another. It further stipulates that the aftermath of conflicts would be the entrenchment of positive social change; that society is in constant conflict due to competition among social groups; and that these conflicts are the engine of social change. Conflict theory argues that "change has crucial significance since it is needed to correct social injustices and inequalities" (Schaefer 547). However, the theory contends that if the changes made to appease conflict maintained a capitalist system, the cycle of conflict would repeat, but if the changes created a new system, socialism, peace, and stability would be achieved.

This study draws on conflict theory, particularly as it relates to oppression, protest, conflict, and change, to examine the quest for liberation in Ben Binebai's *Drums of the Delta*, confident that the play shares similar attributes and embodies the theory's spirit. The theory is applied to explore the conflict between oppressed and marginalised people and the capitalist structure, as represented by the federal government and the international oil companies, in the play. The theory is relevant to the analysis of the texts because the issues it raises are societal and reflect realities, particularly in Nigerian society.

Methodology

This study adopts literary and sociological research methods. This approach involves critically examining the dramatic text

through a sociological lens to determine how it reflects conflict between the two socio-politically parallel groups portrayed. Since the study requires in-depth textual analysis of the chosen text, *Drums of the Delta*, secondary sources, including journals, textbooks, and related play texts, are necessarily referenced during the analysis.

Synopsis of *Drums of the Delta*

Drums of the Delta is a symbolic literary creation, dramatizing the conflictual interaction between the Nigerian state and the Niger Delta over issues ranging from underdevelopment, poverty, and political alienation to ecocide, resource ownership, and social justice. The characters, each representing a major player in the interaction, speak volumes about the profound nature of the politics around oil in Nigeria and serve as metaphors for the actors involved in the agitations for participation and recognition from that section of the country. The play revolves around a community facing oppression, subjugation and tyranny from the Queen of Odokoland. The Queen, a symbolic representation of the Nigerian state, on her tour of the lands, visits the Delta and finds Ebitimi, a dexterous dancer. Understanding the prospects accompanying Ebitimi, who is a symbol of oil and a blessing to the Deltans, she forcefully elopes with him to Odokoland. Infuriated by this act, the people embark on a series of expeditions to reclaim Ebitimi. The force is headed by Isaac Boro, who dies as a result of internal betrayal. Boro returns from the dead, reunites the new breed of freedom fighters, and reignites their spirit of valour to

face the Queen. He is captured by Atala, the Queen's executioner, and put under pressure to denounce the struggle, but he is adamant. In a turn of events, the Queen dies, opening the way for the liberation of the Delta.

Interrogating the Quest for Liberation in the Play

Nigeria's oil wealth has introduced a new dimension to the country's political character, particularly intensifying the political class's fierce struggle to capture and privatise the state at all costs and by all means. The country's politics has become nothing but the grim struggle among the state's institutional groups for control of political power, where the key to accumulating economic wealth resides. The Nigerian Civil War is just evidence of such a grim struggle for political control of the state and, indeed, for oil wealth. This fact is fictionally demonstrated in the *Drums of the Delta*. The exchanges between Queen, a character symbolising the Nigerian state, and Olotu, who represents the Biafra nation and her leadership, provide eloquent support for the argument that the politics, wars, and peace in Nigeria are phenomena pointing to the pursuit of the country's oil wealth. The oil economy is the reason for the seeming political unity, the basis for the several dimensions of conflict, and the basis for the reconciliations that follow crises in the country. Prince of Delta (Ebitimi), referred to in the conversation below, is the Niger Delta oil. Olotu minces no words in making bare his (the Biafran's) intention to take control of the oil economy from the federal government.

OLOTU: I have come to take the Prince of Delta To my newfound kingdom.

QUEEN: The Prince of Delta is my husband, You can't take him away from me.

Here, the marriage metaphor between the Queen and the Prince represents the unholy alliance between the state and oil companies, a dynamic that Eghagha's *The Oily Marriage* (2018) also reflects. The play, as portrayed in the quoted lines above, lends credence to the claim that the war between Nigeria and Biafra was partly a clash of interests over the oil economy. The clash is indicative of the deep interest each tribal nation and its leadership have in oil wealth as the primary political and economic focus. The fight also reveals the forces controlling the country's politics. The Nigerian state, under the inextricable grip of the three numerically superior ethnic nations of Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo, symbolised as Ahmed, Dudu, and Okoye, respectively, in *Drums of the Delta*, excludes the Niger Delta from the sharing of power, wealth, and development. Successive administrations, as the Queen represents in the play, have been enemies of the Niger Delta people, abdicating their civic responsibilities to the region's citizens in order to preserve a partnership with oil companies by acquiring equity stakes. It leaves the Niger Delta people to lament in poverty and darkness while the states and people of the majority groups wallow in affluence and opulence. Isaac's response to his father, Pepple Boro, below, gives a clue:

ISAAC: This is ten years since the Whiteman conspired to kidnap Ebitimi.

No progress in our land.

But the kidnapers and their cohorts are swimming in affluence.

Here, the character Isaac represents Isaac Adaka Boro, the legendary Niger Delta revolutionary. Isaac's lamentation, captured above, reflects the reality of the Niger Delta. It reveals the people's suffering amid plenty. The oil industry has been active for decades, yet the region from which the oil is extracted lacks human capital and infrastructure. The oil resources, personified as Ebitimi, the Prince of the Delta, are portrayed as being kidnapped by the rapacious multinational oil companies and enjoyed by the country's hegemonic political forces. The resources are forcefully exploited, and the economic benefits accruing from them are carted away by a few powerful individuals in government to the exclusion of the Niger Delta people. The wealth is in the hands of the government, but the government uses it to develop other parts of the country without proper attention to the people who host the production.

In *Drums of the Delta*, as in reality in Nigeria, the Niger Delta is excluded from national conversations about political power-sharing. Such dialogues are sacredly exclusive to the Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo nations. However, it is clear from the lines of Chief Biri, a fictional representation of the legendary Chief Harold Dappa-Biriye, a foremost Niger Delta political voice and a statesman of the minorities, that right from the first Republic, the Niger Delta quest has been for resource sovereignty, that is, to control the resources, especially oil resources, from their land. This, obviously, is because they are aware that political power can only be achieved when the

economic space has been occupied. Hence, while Ahmed (Hausa/Fulani) insatiably desires political power, Dudu (Yoruba) aspires for "power and authority to rule", and Okoye (Igbo) pleads for power; Chief Biri (Niger Delta) advocates fiscal federalism and economic freedom.

CHIEF BIRI: Your Majesty, I am from the Delta. I have been asked by the chiefs, Elders and people of Delta to come and take back Ebitimi to the Delta... It is the sacred wish of Deltans. We want the Prince because he is the custodian of our bright destiny. The more you keep him forcefully, the more you impoverish us Forcefully (22).

The play reveals the antagonistic and conspiratorial nature of the majority tribes and their propensity to support the federal government in maintaining the status quo by keeping the oil resources as national assets. Dudu's "Your Majesty, The Prince is yours, the land is yours" (22) brings to mind the various obnoxious laws promulgated by the government to annex the oil wealth and to enjoy exclusive ownership of the land and the economic benefits accruing from it. The voice of the Hausa/Fulani echoes from Ahmed's claims and emboldens the tyrannical federal government in its act of monopolising the oil proceeds and denying the region its rights. The Queen confesses, "Ahmed, your reasoning gives potency to my judgement and sensibility" (23), to justify the injustice perpetrated against the region. Ahmed characterises northern Nigeria and its desperation to continue to dominate the political and economic space. Ahmed states:

AHMED: Your Majesty, Dudu is very right.

The Prince genetically descended from the upper Odokoland and Besides, he has been declared state property.

This means we collectively own the Prince.
Why should these people come here with huge greed to claim what Properly belongs to us all?
We are even the indisputable senior partners In this union of Odokoland. What we hold is what we hold (23).

Ahmed's posturing with "What we hold is what we hold" is a classic manifestation of the bourgeoisie (state) protecting the means of production (oil). Apart from denial of political participation and social and economic discrimination, another issue that is subthematically treated in the play regarding the relationship between the people of the Niger Delta and the Nigerian political leadership is environmental pollution and degradation. The impact of oil pollution on the Niger Delta environment is strongly depicted in Drums of the Delta. Ebiere, a woman advocate, captures the deplorable environmental problems faced by the Niger Delta people:

EBIERE: The fish are scared
Of the river because of the killing
Of the aquatic world by the Prince's pirates.
Our green trees have massively turned brown,
Our rich flora and fauna fall as a result
Of this deadly blow. The land has lost its proud fertility.
Our creek songs of joy have been replaced
With sad songs. Etebetebe water hyacinth,
Have taken over the creeks and
Driven fishes away from the terrain (24).

Equally pivotal is Desela's "Our lives are endangered along with the animals and plants in our forests because of poisons arising from Ebitimi's capture" (40). Besides unfair distribution of wealth and resources, political

balkanisation, and environmental squalor and despoliation, the Nigerian Niger Delta has experienced some of the worst conditions of oppression. Summarily, these conditions include extreme poverty, systematic oppression, corruption and impunity, chronic denial of employment, ethnic persecution and militarisation. In recounting the experience under the oil regime, Ebiere describes the tragic conditions:

EBIERE: Since our Prince was forced into unholy wedlock with the Queen of the Land, we have been wildly dumped on and treated as a conquered
Not only are we dehumanised and cannibalised, but also invaded...
Delta has relentlessly become a land of tragic sunshine.
Besides, raping of women, fire disaster,
Ecological degradation, destruction of our aquatic world, and
Unbridled devastation of our biodiversity has become
Recurring decimals...(39-40).

These debilitating conditions and the environmental, socio-political, and economic injustices faced by the people fuelled the emergence of protest movements and, ultimately, the quest for liberation to challenge the status quo. The various ethnic nationalities have issued declarations and resolutions from the Niger Delta, revealing the deep-seated frustration felt by the people towards both the government and the foreign oil merchants, and articulating demands for environmental justice, political and economic rights, and the right to control their resources. Isaac declares that "freedom is the most wanted desire of the Ijaw nation"... "It is my duty to provide freedom for all of us" (14). Pigha's "I publicly

declare my support for the immediate return of our Prince to the Delta” (40) emphasises the collective quest for economic liberation. Also defining is Ebriere’s “We fight not to destroy Odokoland but to repair our land destroyed by bad laws, bad politics and bad philosophy” (43).

The Niger Delta agitations and clamours for liberation have always met the brute forces of the oil companies and the government. Oil capital relies on blackmail, bribery, manipulation, and lies to divide and destroy its voice and unity, while the state deploys its military to crush any agitation that could disrupt oil exploration, production, and transportation in the country. The Nigerian government, rather than paying attention to the agitations with the genuine intention to address them, responds with brutal repression. Ebriere reveals, “Not only are we dehumanised and cannibalised but also invaded with the plague of genocide wherever and whenever we ask for our God-given rights” (39). This is emphasised by Owei, a character modelled after Government Owezide Ekpomupolo (Tompolo), one of the leading Niger Delta agitators. Owei testifies that “We took our case to Her Majesty only to be shot by her masquerades” (51).

Joshua’s report below is another testament to the agitators’ suffering at the hands of the government. It brings to memory how Niger Delta communities such as Odi, Ayakoromo, Kurutie, Ogbe-Ijoh and others were razed for reasons including harbouring youths calling on the federal government to address the environmental, political and economic imbalances.

JOSHUA: We are finished! Wheel guns
Have been wheeled to the land from
The dreaded colony of power. The warriors are
All over the land like locusts and voodoo bees
With weapons of destruction. People are
roasted alive.
Villages and voices are crying under the mud
(53).

Owei’s “blood is flowing; blood is flying...blood has lost its value in our land” (51) explains the aftermath of these attacks on the people. As the land is exploited, so also are the people. As the land bleeds oil, so the people bleed tears in their abject poverty and real blood as they fall under the constant assault of government agents sent to silence their protests. From the time of Isaac Boro and Ken Saro-Wiwa to the era of Government Ekpomupolo (Tompolo) and others, the government’s hostility has been enormous. The federal government has destroyed many lives through the troops deployed to the area, and many are permanently incapacitated due to attacks by the military forces.

Conclusion

The perspectives provided above offer valuable insights into how the Niger Delta has navigated the concepts of economic and political liberation, how various movements have emerged to challenge oppressive regimes, and how the government has displayed an attitude inimical to the yearnings and aspirations of the people. In interrogating these narratives, it is realised that the journey toward economic liberation is as much about changing systems as it is about changing hearts and minds. Drums of the Delta succinctly captures the fate of Niger Delta agitators,

portrayed as the oppressed fighting for liberty. It questions whose interests are served by resource exploitation and highlights the struggles of the country's majority tribal nations as they fight to control oil resources. The play shows that the Niger Delta's exclusion is deliberate, and until a serious revolution is carried out against the powerful rulers in government and in the oil and gas business, positive change is far from the region. The play is a clean and veritable archive for understanding the Niger Delta's plight and struggles since oil was discovered in Nigeria.

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